

THE FRUIT OF CONSCIENCE

BY WARREN SCHOLL

OUR civilization is the product of innumerable conflicts. Obscure billions have waged bitter battles; and from the fitful hotch-potch of lost causes, ephemeral fanaticisms, and unknown infamies, has evolved the present scheme of society. The great bulk of mankind has not relished violence—what then actuated the combatants? Greed, hypocrisy, struggle for survival, and a divinely ordained predestination are among the reasons frequently advanced, but are these the true reasons?

Suppose we consider a typical past conflict. About 71 B. C. in Italy, sixty thousand slaves and peasants rallied around Spartacus, and attempted to overthrow the Roman slave system. They were cut to pieces, and Spartacus himself died fighting. What caused this carnage? One may suggest for the revolutionists: love of liberty, and struggle for survival; and for the loyalists: greed, hypocrisy, and struggle for survival; but it seems to me that these reasons are merely results of some powerful agency present in both belligerents. Both believed in the necessity of their respective principles: whence came this faith? I believe that it came from the source of all faith—conscience; the postulated faculty that distinguishes right from wrong.

For another example, take the struggle which occasioned the Apocalypse of the Christian Revelation. About 60 A. D. the Roman Empire embraced northern Africa and practically all of Europe; and the mass of Roman citizens attributed much of their success as conquerors to the potency of their own numerous gods and goddesses. They ridiculed all foreign gods, and particularly despised the Yahveh of the Jews. Gessius Florus, the procurator of Judea, taunted the Jews into insurrection, and then called for the legions of Rome. Conservative Jews who questioned the wisdom

of revolt, were promptly killed by their radical brethren, the Zealots, and it was a desperate Jewish army that strove to check the Roman campaign in Palestine. But their valor was in vain; they were ultimately annihilated. Was this predestination? It seems monstrous to charge a divine being, assumed to be merciful and just, with the fiendish plan of creating men only to pit them against each other; and if we presume an additional deity, satanic in character, we clasp a puerile polydemonism. However, both the Romans and the Jews believed in the necessity of their causes; hence, I affirm that the underlying origin of the struggle was conscience.

Consider the Crusades. These were religious wars started in 1100 by the Christians, who were enraged at the Turkish persecutions of Christian Pilgrims to Palestine. Hostilities were first directed against the Turks, but finally against all who did not profess Christianity. Hundreds of thousands of Jews in European cities were massacred. Approximately two million Christians and Mohammedans were killed. At the peak of the frenzy, more than forty thousand Christian children left France and Germany for the Holy Land. About ten thousand of them perished while crossing the mountains. A few thousand reached Marseilles, and prayed for the Mediterranean Sea to open in order that they could cross to Africa. The sea did not part, so the courageous ones of their number embarked on ships and were never heard of again. The wars of the Crusades lasted for two hundred years, and the whole gory affair was characterized on both sides by intense fanaticism. What else is fanaticism but conscience running amuck?

What incited the recent world war, with its slogans of "Gott Mit Uns!" and "Make the World Safe for Democracy!" What aroused the Reds and Whites in the recent Russian Revolution? Today, what impels the socialists? the birth-control martyrs? the pacifists? and their hosts of conservative opponents? To the struggles of men, I can ascribe only one basic motive—conscience.

Upon the nature of conscience, I can only speculate. Our thoughts seem to be emanations coursing through a few pounds of brain matter, as electricity through a wire. Whether these emanations spring from the matter itself, or trickle from some infinite source, depends upon one's beliefs. Anyhow, Nature endows these emanations with a sense of consciousness—the emanations perceive themselves. They produce the ego, what some are pleased to call the illusion of self, and issue a dogmatic wisdom that attempts to guide the individual.

Is this wisdom generally correct? The combatants in the conflicts previously mentioned, obeyed conscience, yet at least half followed causes that contributed little to existing society. You, Reader, may object that they were insincere; but men do not martyr themselves for hypocrisy. And if you still doubt, consider a few individuals whose sincerity has convinced millions. Can one discreetly doubt the integrity of Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Paulus, Mohammed. The Bab, Swedenborg, and Mary Baker Eddy? Each believed that he or she was in touch with truth, yet it is obvious that all did not issue truth, as man defines it.

Take another instance. When the Black Plague lashed Europe, tens of thousands of Christians, known as the Flagellants, consulted their consciences and decided that the plague was the result of the wrath of God. Attempting to appease this wrath, they murdered all the Jews they could lay hands on; and then went half-naked from city to city, chanting hymns, flogging each other, and of course broadcasting the plague as they went. I think we can truthfully conclude that regardless of individual desires and supplications, the conscience may mislead into serious error.

Despite the historical examples that prove this statement, there still exists a child-like faith in conscience. For example, some of our orthodox Christians—I refer to the rabid cults—contend that the world is immersed in sin, and that this is the result of what they (the rabid cults) assume to be divine commands. While conditions today are deplorable, it seems to me that a glance at history indicates that we are today better than past generations in every way—morally, mentally, and physically. But to go on, these rabid cults would save the world by legislating against science; by teaching a polydemonism, what else can one call a good- and bad-god theology; and in some instances, by terrorizing those who disagree with them.

And faith in conscience is not confined to the theosophists alone. Many of our otherwise practical business men and statesmen, knowing little or nothing about the true plans or purposes of reformers, denounce them as idiots and idealists. Ephemeral, useless causes are almost as prevalent today as they were in the past; and they are, to their followers, just as plausible and necessary as flogging was to the Flagellants.

Now, none of us would enjoy following a cause that is ultimately proven inane, so the question is—what test can one apply that will reduce this misleading of conscience to a minimum? I offer the

Test of Reason, the process that recognizes only facts such as may be perceived and proven by rational men here and now, the process that gets all pertinent facts before it produces conclusions, the process that distils truth from the motley outpouring of conscience. Definitely, let us ask: what facts indicate that I am right? Are these all the pertinent facts? Are they facts acknowledged by unbiased authorities? Such introspection may seem tedious, but what other solution that has worked can one put in its place? And isn't some sort of a refining process necessary? Isn't conscience prone to whispering soft lies that uselessly mislead billions into abysses of hatred, persecution, and battle?